



Conserve O Gram

July 1993

Number 1/1

Preservation Of Museum Collections

The preservation and continued use of a museum collection and its associated data depend on a park's long-term commitment to an ongoing conservation program. The primary goal of museum object conservation is to preserve whatever still exists of the object as nearly as possible in an unchanging state. In the National Park Service, this goal is achieved by the ongoing activity of *preventive conservation* supplemented, when necessary, by *conservation treatment*.

Preventive Conservation

Preventive conservation emphasizes non-interventive actions to prevent damage to and minimize deterioration of a museum object. Such actions include:

- Monitoring and recording levels of environmental agents (e.g., light, relative humidity, temperature, and air pollution)
- Inspecting and recording the condition of objects
- Controlling environmental agents
- Establishing an Integrated Pest Management (IPM) program in all spaces housing museum collections
- Practicing proper handling, storage, exhibit, housekeeping, and packing and shipping techniques
- Incorporating needed information and procedures regarding the museum collection in emergency management plans

Preventive conservation is best implemented by the development of a park-specific plan that identifies tasks, establishes schedules and costs, and coordinates staff responsibilities in carrying out an ongoing program for the care and maintenance of the museum collection. An effective preventive conservation program will minimize the need for costly conservation treatment. Refer to the NPS *Museum Handbook*, Part I (Rev 9/90), Chapter 3, for a detailed discussion of preventive conservation.

Conservation Treatment

Conservation treatment is the interventive, *hands-on* work of preserving the physical and/or the aesthetic condition of a museum object. The two broad categories of interventive treatments are as follows:

- *Stabilization* is a treatment action that is taken to increase the stability or durability of an object when preventive conservation measures fail to decrease the rate of deterioration to an acceptable level, or when an object has deteriorated to the point where it is in danger of being completely lost.
- *Restoration* is a treatment action that is taken in an attempt to bring an object as close as possible to its original appearance, or to its appearance at a particular time period, by removing accretions and subsequent additions, and/or by replacing missing elements.

Interventive treatments must be fully documented and performed according to the *Code of Ethics and the Standards of Practice of the American Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works*. According to professional ethics and

NPS *Management Policies* (Dec 88), any restoration treatment must be the minimum necessary, be fully documented, and be conducted without fraudulent intent. Refer to the NPS *Museum Handbook*, Part I (Rev 9/90), Chapter 8, for detailed guidance on conservation treatment.

Responsibility

Conservation of museum objects is a shared role between the curator and the conservator. Mutual understanding and respect for each other's role and responsibilities to the collection are important. The curator is skilled in the management, preservation, and use of the museum collection. Often, the curator is a discipline or material culture specialist (e.g., archeology, history, biology, fine arts, Civil War weapons, 19th-century furniture). The conservator is skilled in the theoretical and practical aspects of preventive conservation and of performing examination and conservation treatments of museum objects.

Most conservators specialize in specific classes of materials (e.g., paintings, furniture, paper, textiles, metals, ceramics and glass, photographs, archeological or ethnographic objects, or natural history specimens). The roles of the curator and the conservator in preserving museum collections are illustrated in the chart on page 3 of this *Conserve O Gram*.

Reference

Ward, Phillip R. *The Nature of Conservation, A Race Against Time*. Santa Monica, CA: The J. Paul Getty Institute, 1986.

Anthony M. Knapp
Staff Curator
Curatorial Services Division
National Park Service
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

Revised 1993.

The *Conserve O Gram* series is published as a reference on collections management and curatorial issues. Mention of a product, a manufacturer, or a supplier by name in this publication does not constitute an endorsement of that product or supplier by the National Park Service. Sources named are not all inclusive. It is suggested that readers also seek alternative product and vendor information in order to assess the full range of available supplies and equipment.

The series is distributed to all NPS units and is available to non-NPS institutions and interested individuals by subscription through the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402, FAX (202) 512-2233. For further information and guidance concerning any of the topics or procedures addressed in the series, contact the National Park Service, Curatorial Services Division, Harpers Ferry, WV 25425, (304) 535-6410.

Curator and Conservator Roles in Preserving Museum Collections¹

Preventive Conservation	
Curator	Conservator
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitors and assesses the condition of objects • Monitors and evaluates the museum environment • Practices proper methods and techniques for storing, exhibiting, handling, packing, and shipping of objects • Develops and carries out an ongoing housekeeping/maintenance program for collection spaces • Prepares an emergency management plan for the museum collection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assesses the condition of objects; conducts Collection Condition Surveys² • Alerts staff to signs and causes of deterioration • Provides technical guidance on museum environment, storage, exhibits, handling, packing, and shipping • Assists in development of housekeeping/maintenance programs and in preparation of emergency management plans
Conservation Treatment	
Curator	Conservator
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Documents history, significance, value, and proposed use of each object to be treated • Develops and monitors contracts for conservation services • Assesses, in consultation with conservator, the suitability of written treatment proposals and authorizes treatments • Monitors the progress of treatment for each object • Ensures continuing care for treated objects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examines and documents conditions and problems of objects • Prepares treatment proposals for curatorial review and approval • Performs suitable treatments • Documents treatments performed • Recommends methods for the future maintenance and care of treated objects

Notes: 1. The chart is based on Figure 3.1 in Chapter 3 of the NPS *Museum Handbook*, Part I (Rev 9/90).
 2. Refer to the NPS *Museum Handbook*, Part I, Chapter 3, for guidance on Collection Condition Surveys.